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Hunting Reynard: How *Reynard the Fox* Tricked his Way into English and Dutch Children's Literature

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Abstract This article examines adaptations in their capacity of preserving literary heritage. It describes how the Middle Dutch beast epic *Reynard the Fox* lost its position in literature for adults and became part of a literary heritage that was no longer read but only studied for its historical value. Versions for children kept the story alive. A comparison of English and Dutch adaptations of the beast epic demonstrates the influence of different cultural contexts on transformation strategies used to cross the bridge between the rough medieval satire and children's literature. While English adaptations affiliated the story to other genres, its status as the embodiment of Dutch national character compelled Dutch rewriters to find a satisfying justification to provide children with a story lead by a remarkably scandalous hero.

Keywords Adaptation · Written folklore · Literary heritage · Historicism · Medieval beast epic

Reynard the Forefather: Introduction

Being the forefather of famous descendants like Beatrix Potter's *Mr. Tod* (1912) and Roald Dahl's *Fantastic Mr. Fox* (1970), it is surprising that *Reynard the Fox* is seldom mentioned by name in scholarly writing on classical figures in children's literature.¹ He often vanishes in the

¹ Exceptions are Goldthwaite (1987a,b) and Bottigheimer (2004). Goldthwaite argues that Beatrix Potter did not create the characters in *The Tale of Mr. Tod* (1912) herself, but found them in the stories about Uncle Remus, written by Joel Chandler Harris, which she began to illustrate in 1893.

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repository of the oral tradition of folklore, or is drowned out by the tradition of written folklore developed around characters like Robinson Crusoe, Gulliver and Don Quixote. Although Western European literature is still haunted by this trickster fox figure, only a few people will know him by name. Even if they do, they will probably not know him through the original *Reynard* story, but through one of the illustrated adaptations for children. They 'would be surprised to learn,' wrote Varty (1999), the English *Reynard* specialist, 'that he was once the leading character in a book meant for adults which became a best-seller in the fifteenth century and remained popular for more than 200 years, a book characterized by violence, murder, adultery, rape and corruption in high places' (p. 23).

In this article I will go fox hunting. I will try to draw the family tree of Reynard's British descendants and compare them to their Dutch counterparts. I will show how Reynard tricked his way into the realm of English and Dutch children's literature, how he managed to survive through a series of disguises and a very smart use of language; and how Reynard's iconic status in Dutch literary heritage caused Dutch rewriters to use different adaptation strategies from those used by English rewriters. The medieval Reynard was a scoundrel. Did this scoundrel change his attitude in the adaptations for children, or did he just hide his slyness under a new shiny red, furry and child-proof disguise?²

Reynard the Fox

The first version of the story, *Van den Vos Reynaerde* ('About Reynard the Fox'), was based on a French animal epic: the *Roman de Renard*. It was written down in Middle Dutch in the thirteenth century by an author known as Willem and, as it was rooted in the oral folklore tradition, it was recorded in verse. The story can be defined as a satire in which cleverness triumphs over physical strength and social power: Reynard the Fox is summoned to the court of King Noble the Lion, because he has committed many crimes: thievery, betrayal, abuse and rape. When he does not turn up, Noble sends three messengers to fetch him. Bruin the bear is known for his physical strength, but Reynard traps him, using his greed for honey. Tibert the cat is known for his intelligence, but Reynard traps him as well, using his greed for mice. With the third messenger, however, Reynard's cousin Grimbard the badger, Reynard is brought to court. Heavy charges are laid upon him and he is convicted to be hanged. However, using his wit and smooth talk once again, he manages to deceive the king and the queen, exploiting their

Footnote 1 continued

In *The International Companion Encyclopedia of Children's Literature* Ruth Bottigheimer (2004) noted that the *Uncle Remus* stories 'bear a close resemblance to the tales of the medieval *Reynard* cycle' (p. 272). This can be confirmed by an article published in 1890 by F. M. Warren. Warren compared the *Uncle Remus* stories with the medieval French fox tales in the *Roman de Renard* and with the Flemish version of one of its branches. He came to the same conclusion: '(...) they bear a striking resemblance to the only large collections of animal lore made on European soil, of which the most extensive is that known as the 'Roman de Renard'' (Warren 1890, p. 129). According to Warren, the fox tales travelled to America by means of oral transmission. He described how the trickster figure of the fox changed his guise into rabbit fur when he arrived in America, but the adventures remained the same. He gave more than fifteen examples of passages where the *Uncle Remus* stories correspond to the *Roman de Renard*, and another set of examples in which they resemble the Flemish *Reynaert de Vos*.

² I used the *Integrated Catalogue* of the British Library, the *Cambridge Bibliography of English Literature*, the *National Union Catalogue*, the *Dictionary Catalogue of Research Libraries* and every reference to versions of the story I could find in books and articles, texts and paratexts. However, I had to rely on the titles. Adaptations published in collections of children's stories or children's magazines were difficult to find. I traced some of them through references in other books. Two of the rewritings I discuss were actually published in the US, but they did find their way to England and functioned there as texts for children. Therefore I included them in my study. Servais' rewriting from 1972, which is a translation from a French adaptation from 1958, is also included.

Fig. 1 Reynard's triumph. From *The rare Romance of Reynard the Fox, the Crafty Courtier: together with the shifts of his sone Reynardine*. In words of one syllable by Day (1872)



greed for gold and their lust for power. Noble sets him free and, after murdering some more, Reynard escapes.

In the fourteenth century, this story is rewritten in prose by another Flemish writer, Aernout. This version is called *Reynaerts Historie* ('Reynard's History'). Aernout added a second part to it with a similar structure. This time, however, the story does not end with Reynard's freedom; he even gets appointed to a high post at court. The version ends with an explicit moral message: watch out for Reynards amongst political rulers (Fig. 1).

Reynaerts Historie crossed the Channel to Britain in 1481. William Caxton's translation resulted in the development of an English *Reynard* tradition, based on the Middle Dutch version of the story.³ Caxton's text was reprinted several times during the fifteenth and sixteenth century, without many changes.⁴ The seventeenth century asked for literature that was not only entertaining but also morally appropriate and therefore reprintings of the *Reynard* story appeared with some changes, additions and abbreviations.⁵ Yet, however popular Reynard's exploits were in previous centuries, the interest in the story waned during the eighteenth century, in which the cultural elite thought it no longer appropriate reading in polite society (Varty 1999, p. 265). Renewal came from the continent again, this time from Germany. In 1794 Johann Wolfgang Goethe wrote an adaptation of the *Reynard* story, called *Reineke Fuchs*, which was, once more, based on the second Middle Dutch *Reynard* story. This version was highly praised and translated into English within 10 years. Yet, the real revival of the interest in the story came half a century later. It was brought about by a stuffed animal exposition, based on the illustrations in Goethe's adaptation, that was held as part of the Great

³ The text Caxton translated was the prose version of *Reynaerts Historie* that Gheraert Leeu published in Gouda in 1479, called *Die Hystorie van Reynaert die Vos* (Varty 2000).

⁴ Reprintings from Caxton include for example those of Wynkyn de Worde (1495 and 1515), Richard Pynson (1490 and 1500), Thomas Gaultier (1550), William Powell (1560) and Edward Allde (1586) (Varty 1999, p. 254–255).

⁵ For example, the versions of Edward Brewster in 1672 and 1681 in which the original story is followed by a sequel about Reynard's life at court and the whereabouts of his son Reynardine (Varty 1999, p. 255).

Exhibition in 1851 in the Crystal Palace. Professor J. A. Froude reported how this stuffed animal exposition attracted young and old, rich and poor, to such an extent that they all started to read the *Reynard* story anew:

(...) a few years ago it was rare to find a person who had read the Fox Epic (...) but now the charming figures of Reineke himself, and King Lion, and Isegrim, and Bruin (...) had set all the world asking who and what they were, and the story began to get itself known. The old editions, which had long slept unbound in reams upon the shelves, began to descend and to clothe themselves in green and crimson. Mr. Dickens sent a summary of it around the households of Britain. Everybody began to talk of Reineke. (Froude 1852/1906, p. 279)

The original Caxton version was taken up again and scholarly editions were prepared. In addition, the story was also adapted for a wider audience. Abbreviated renderings appeared as chapbooks and simplified, illustrated versions as children's books. Goethe's *Reineke Fuchs* had not only revived the interest in the story, it also became the most important source text for the translations and adaptations of the story in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Almost all the English adaptations are based on it.⁶

However, Reynard's character and behaviour did not provide him with easy access to young readers. In fact, one might even ask if the real Reynard was accepted at all. The story underwent some serious changes before British children could actually lay their eyes on it. Reynard's English descendants differ from him as much as family members can differ from each other. However, they allowed the story to survive in Britain. They kept the work alive by carrying it from one system into another by means of compromising between the constraints of the systems: the rough medieval satire, full of references to violence, sex and politics, either explicitly mentioned in no uncertain terms or subtly hidden in language puns, was modified to fit in with nineteenth- and twentieth-century ideas about the pedagogical appropriateness of the narrative and the cognitive ability of the child.⁷ The transformation strategies that rewriters used to bridge the gap between the medieval satire and the children's literary system can be classified in two categories. The first category concerns changes that were made in order to transform the narrative into another genre. The second category concerns the different ways of dealing with the villainous character of the hero and the fact that he triumphs in the end.

Reynard the Fairy Tale

Shavit's observation that translated children's books tend to affiliate to existing models in the target culture applies to the adaptations of the *Reynard* story as well (cf. Shavit 1981, 1986, p. 113–121). A lot of English rewriters laid the model of the fairy tale over the original

⁶ One could say that it was only a slight digression from the initial source text of the English versions; *Reineke Fuchs* was based on a high German translation of a low German text printed in Lübeck, which descended directly from *Reinaerts Historie*, as did Caxton's text. (Varty 2000, p. 172).

⁷ *Reynard the Fox* has gone through the same development as Shavit (1986) described for 'classics' such as *Robinson Crusoe* and *Gulliver's Travels*. After the Middle Dutch version of the story was translated into English in the fifteenth century, the story was read by both adults and children up until the nineteenth century. But as nineteenth- and twentieth-century adaptations made it into a story meant for children only, the text lost its position in literature for adults. It became part of a literary heritage that was no longer read but studied by adults, and studied only for its historical value. For children, however, it remained a story that could be read as a 'living text' (Shavit 1986, p. 116).

Reynard story so that it reshaped the entire reading of the story. The humorous, but utterly distressing satirical representation of human beings, human life and human society was transformed into a reassuring fairy-tale story in which good and bad were easily distinguished, in which the world had its dangers and its inhabitants their faults, but in the end evil was punished and the characters as well as the reader could live happily ever after. Besides using typical fairy-tale opening and ending sentences,⁸ foregrounding the king as a stereotypical character was one of the strategies used to affiliate the story to the fairy tale. The original mocking of the king's greed for gold and the fact that he is so easily fooled by Reynard's deceiving words were replaced by an image of a king which accorded better with the cultural frame of a fairy tale king and the pedagogical ideal of the way to address authority. Contrary to the original story, the king is put forward as a majestic and righteous monarch, whose faults are mitigated (cf. Servais 1958).

A very interesting rewriting in this respect is the rewriting of Alan Vaës, published in 1994. Vaës embedded the *Reynard* story in a tale about a young king who struggled with rebellious subjects. Desperate for help, he and his wife asked an old hermit for advice. The hermit offered to provide them with an example of a king who had to deal with a subject far worse than these rebels: he told them the story of Reynard the fox. The story is accompanied by large pictures of the king and the queen, the rebels and all the characters of the *Reynard* story, but the wise hermit is only seen from the back with his hood on. However, a first hint of the identity of the hermit is already given at the beginning of the story. When he was called to court, he said to himself: 'I never expected I'd ever be invited back to Court' (Vaës 1994, p. 8). After he finished his story, when 'he turned and headed back to the distant cave in the dark forest,' one can see in the illustration how a big, hairy, red tail is flowing out from under his cape (Vaës 1994, p. 63).

Reynard the Animal Story

Another genre to which rewriters chose to affiliate the epic was the animal story. 'Man may be the most interesting thing to man, but animals are more interesting to children and to men of the childlike mind,' wrote *Reynard* rewriter Jacobs in 1895 (p. xxviii). The device of using animal characters to portray human characteristics had become very popular in the nineteenth century, developing into the emergence of well-known children's classics in Britain in the second half of the nineteenth and the first decades of the twentieth century, such as *The Jungle Book* (1894), *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* (1902), *The Wind in the Willows* (1908) and *Winnie-the-Pooh* (1925) (Barker 1996, p. 282).⁹ As noted by Jacobs a century before, the reason often given for animal stories becoming so popular in children's literature was that animals and children were linked. Barker argues that since the Industrial Revolution animals and children had a similar status in the world: both were protected and privileged at the same time. Consequently, animals had a similar inferior status with respect to human beings as children had to adults. Therefore children were thought to identify easily with animal characters (Barker 1996, p. 282).

⁸ Two early rewritings that mark the chosen genre explicitly in the opening and ending sentences are the adaptations in *The Poll Parrot Picture Book* (1871) and *The Robber Kitten and other stories* (1880). 'Once upon a time, Noble the Lion, King of Beasts, held High Court,' wrote the anonymous author of *The Poll Parrot Picture Book*. The rewriter of *The Robber Kitten and other stories* finished the adaptation with a reassuring 'and the fox spent his days from thenceforth, with his wife and children, in great joy and content' (p. 31).

⁹ Barker (1996) reasonably points out that although the characters in Milne's story are 'technically toys', they display the features of 'human beings as animals'. In fact they are not just toys, they are stuffed *animals*.

The fact that *Reynard the Fox* was not only a story about animals, but a *medieval* story about animals, gave some of the rewriters an additional reason to consider it suitable for children. They argued that children would identify with medieval animal stories more easily because they were still primitive in nature, and in the primitive society of the Middle Ages people were closer to animals than 'modern' people. This justification recalls an anthropological view on the Middle Ages prevalent in the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century, in which the metaphor of a growing child was used to explain human development over time. The Middle Ages were described as the 'childhood of society' and the people that created the story were considered to be 'childlike', as Daalder (1950) wrote in the preface to one of his adaptations of medieval stories:

Undoubtedly there is a strong relationship between them [the children] and the primitive artists, depicting this world. They too know the contradictions in the youth community and in their own souls, one searches in vain for nuances between white and black. The fine, shaded ethics of sedate adults, the relativism of the modern man, is strange to them and whoever forces it upon them anticipates and achieves nothing but the opposite of his goal. They can still hate and honour, vilify and applaud, balancing between positive and negative inclinations – for them there is an immediate connection between sin and punishment, the idea that deeds are worth more than thoughts and that one is obliged to choose consistency above opportunism. And their form does not differ much from the form of the medieval jugglers: a sober and direct word, loaded with sentiment, is more familiar to them than the phrases of the modern, fashionable and talkative man. (Daalder 1950, p. 12, my translation)

Daalder mingled the metaphorical use of the child as the physical and psychological representation of a developing society with the glorification of societies from the past, which brings about a convincing argument to inspire adult mediators to get children to read medieval stories for both the possibility of identifying with and learning from them. He revealed his image of the target readers as primitive and at the same time he creates an implicit 'we' that hints at an adult mediator by contrasting the children that are supposed to read the text ('them'), and the ones that created the story in the first place (the 'primitive artists'), with 'sedate adults' and 'the modern man'. The children are ascribed strong black and white thinking and supposed to be lacking nuances as opposed to the 'fine, shaded ethics' and 'relativism' of the adult and modern men. By taking up the word 'anticipation', Daalder evokes the concept of development. A positive appreciation of children's ability to experience the extremes—hating and honouring, vilifying and applauding—and the way they express themselves with 'a sober and direct word, loaded with sentiment' is set against a negative appreciation of the 'phrases of the fashionable and talkative man.' (Parlevliet 2006).

In the narrative itself, rewriters transformed the satirical character, wordplay and original structure of *Reynard the Fox* into a story in which the fact that the main characters are animals prevailed over all the other aspects. This was accomplished by creating animals that did not occur in the original story and by putting in new scenes that emphasised the setting of the story in an animal world. It is most clearly seen in versions written in the first half of the twentieth century, for example in the adaptation of Kuhfus (1931). In this version all sorts of animals are added to the story. The story opens with animals that are close to the world of experience of young readers. Only species that can be seen in the woods or found on a children's farm appear in the first chapter, like a frog, a pig, several geese, a cow and a squirrel. At court, more animals appear, this time animals not to be found in the world directly surrounding the child readers, but encountered by them only at places such as the zoo or the

circus, like a tiger, an elephant and a giraffe. Through this device, Kuhfus evoked a distinction between common life in the woods and life at court by playing with the readers' level of familiarity with the presented characters.

However, the transformation of the original genre of the medieval beast epic did not suffice for its acceptance as children's literature. The story contains many elements that nineteenth- and early twentieth-century society did not regard as educationally appropriate. Deleting references to sex, violence and indecencies seems to have been relatively easy for the rewriters.¹⁰ Also, political clues and the mockery of religion were avoided without changing the frame of the narrative. Nevertheless, the fact that Reynard's criminal behaviour led to his triumph in the end caused both English and Dutch *Reynard*-rewriters considerable trouble.

Reynard the Villain

In the 1852 issue of *Fraser's Magazine*, Professor Froude asked how it was possible that he felt sympathy for Reynard, that he even admired the fox, while it 'seemed beyond the power of sophistry to whitewash' him: 'Murder, and theft, and adultery, sacrilege, perjury, lying – his very life is made of them. On he goes to the end, heaping crime on crime, and lie on lie' (Froude 1852/1906, p. 277) (Fig. 2).

Froude decided to research this apparent contradiction and gathered other people's judgements of the cunning red rascal. Interestingly enough, the results turned out to be gender-specific: women detested Reynard and the creator of this story, while men felt sympathy for the fox and admired him without feelings of uneasiness. In a lawyer-like search for mitigating circumstances and qualities that would outweigh Reynard's wickedness, Froude found courage, steady self-confidence, self-trust, self-reliance and intellect. He did not answer his question with children in mind, however, and judging from the adaptations, the rewriters of the English versions for children did not consider defending the villain a proper solution. In his adaptation of the *Reynard* story, *The pleasant history of Reynard the Fox*, Felix Summerly (1843) changed the ending radically. Instead of rewarding Reynard, Summerly let him be hanged because he considered it unsuitable for children to read that a villain like Reynard might triumph. In his preface he expressed the faith that other, 'older', readers would understand his decision:

Bearing in mind that they are republished in this shape for children, older readers, who are familiar with the history of Reynard, will not, I trust, be indignant at my doing poetical justice to the Fox, instead of allowing him to become the Lion's prime minister according to the old tradition. (Summerly 1843, p. 5)

¹⁰ A famous example of adapting a scabrous element in the *Reynard* story is the episode of Tibert the cat. In the Middle Dutch version of the story, Tibert the cat gets trapped in the courtyard of a pastor and his family. Although it is in the middle of the night, Tibert screams so loudly that the pastor and his family all come running out of bed stark naked. They start to hit the cat and in his panic, Tibert attacks the pastor and bites off one of his testicles. From the eighteenth century chapbook versions onwards, this scene gets bowdlerized: Tibert no longer bites off a testicle, he bites off the priest's nose. In his book *The castrated nose* Goossens (1988) explains this bowdlerisation by the changing attitude towards bodily behaviour as a result of a process of civilisation: the reluctance of openly showing bodily behaviour lead to a reluctance to speak about it, which is reflected in the adaptations of the story (p. 113–123).

Fig. 2 Reynard the villain. From *De oude vos* [The old fox] by Henry (1874)



Apparently Summerly did not consider hanging inappropriate for children to read about. The adaptation is a strongly abbreviated version of the *Reynard* story, which relies mainly on the republished illustrations of Aldert van Everdingen.¹¹ It presents Reynard as undeniably bad and along with the altered ending, it censures every reference to sexuality and religion. The same holds for David Vedder's adaptation in 1852. Vedder went so far as to describe Reynard as a 'state criminal' and considered it utterly inappropriate for him to get away with his crimes:

To have allowed this over-gorged public defaulter to loll on the woolsack in ease and honour, while he fleeced the lieges with impunity,—to bask in the sunshine of royal favour, while he perverted the stream of justice, and set the laws of the land at defiance,—to accumulate riches equal to the public resources of the kingdom by fraud, without impeachment, trial, and well-merited infamy,—would have abetted the avaricious propensities of public peculators, strengthened the hands of ingenious tyranny, and our youthful aspirants after fame and fortune might have forgotten the awful denunciation, that “fire shall consume the tabernacles of bribery,” and “the hope of unjust men perish”. (Vedder 1852, p. XIII)

If we consider all the English versions of *Reynard the Fox* that were adapted for children, a clear distinction with regard to the ending of the story can be seen. Like Summerly (1843) and Vedder (1852), Aunt Mary (1852) and the *Poll Parrot Picture Book* (1871) punished Reynard. Ploucquet (1854) and *Robber Kitten* (1880) steered a middle course by not letting

¹¹ Aldert van Everdingen was a seventeenth-century Dutch artist. His *Reynard* illustrations were first published in *Reineke Fuchs* from J. C. Gottshed in 1752. Van Everdingen's drawings served as models for the pictures of Wilhelm von Kaulbach.

Reynard be rewarded, but nevertheless let him remain free. From 1885 onwards, however, the strategy to deal with the red rascal changed. Holloway (1852), Cartwright (1908), Evans (1921), Drinkwater (1924) and Brown (1969) kept the end of the story intact, but presented it as a warning for unsavoury characters like Reynard. Brown (1969), for example, gave his readers the instruction that 'The Fox (...) is not the sort of "hero" to look up to and try to imitate' (Brown 1969, p. 7). De Sanctis (1885), however, gave Reynard the same benefit of the doubt as Froude by justifying Reynard's triumph with his wit. Through Reynard, she encouraged child readers to develop their own wisdom in order to earn honour:

"Children," he used to say to his sons, "you must not long for riches and honour, but for wisdom; be clever, be sharp, and all the rest will come without the seeking!" (De Sanctis 1885, p. 168)

One of the few rewriters who actually allowed Reynard to be the villainous villain he was born to be, is Selina Hastings (1990). She even increased the suspense in her descriptions by creating a dark atmosphere:

The shadow of Reynard the Fox had fallen across the lives of all the animals. It was a lithe, narrow shadow, a shadow that moved fast and dangerously. (Hastings 1990, p. 8)

Thus, in the adaptations for children the list of positive qualities Froude (1852/1906) found in Reynard is reduced to either none or just one quality mentioned in mitigation or as a justification for offering children a bad main character who triumphs: his cleverness. As Froude praised this quality in Reynard, the authors of the adaptations call on their readers to develop this themselves in order to be successful in life. More than 50 years later the same justification for presenting Reynard as a hero can be found in The Netherlands. The Netherlands had a rich tradition of publishing and republishing the *Reynard* story,¹² but they struggled with the evil main character as well. In the adaptations, however, the story was much less drastically changed.

Reynard the Family Man

Although some Dutch rewriters changed the fate of the fox (cf. Agatha 1872; Anonymous 1875; Louwerse 1897), most of them kept the original ending, more often without than with an explicit warning for human beings who behaved like Reynard. The difference between the Dutch and the English adaptations can be explained by Reynard's status as an icon of Dutch national culture as it developed in the nineteenth century. After Jakob Grimm argued Reynard's roots to be Germanic instead of French in 1834, the story had started to play a role in the perception of literary history as a representation of the history of a national community.¹³ This perception assumed that a national character would reveal itself in language; in language the spirit of a nation would be reflected. Thus in literature the spiritual development of the people could be recovered. This applied primarily to collective myths and folklore that, it was argued, could reveal the traditions of a national culture. The folkloristic origins of *Reynard the Fox* perfectly fit into this perception of literature as the purest expression of a

¹² I found 49 rewritings of *Reynard the Fox* between 1850 and 1950 alone in Dutch.

¹³ Working on a theory about the origin of fables, Grimm was the first to draw attention to *Reynard the Fox*. He argued that it was true that the story was the literary manifestation of Frankish legends, but its roots were Germanic, because the Franks were a Germanic tribe (Leerssen 2006, p. 75–79).

Fig. 3 Grimbard the Badger on his way to fetch Reynard. Illustration by W. Heskes in *Reinaart de Vos* [Reynard the Fox] by Oosterhoff (1935)



national culture.¹⁴ Consequently, *Reynard the Fox* became the embodiment of the Dutch national character (Fig. 3) (Leerssen 2006, p. 75–88).

As it was agreed upon that the *Reynard* story was one of the most important literary texts of Dutch culture, the educational system asked for its discussion in schools. A new law on education in 1863 made the teaching of literature compulsory. In parallel with history education at that time, literary education aimed at constituting a strong nation through literary history. Students had to gain detailed knowledge about the country they lived in and the way they should behave as a citizen of that country. Getting to know their literary heritage would make the students feel part of their country and be proud of it. This pride would mould the students into good citizens and good citizens were what the Dutch nation needed, because good citizens would strengthen the Dutch nation. This, so it was believed, would prevent The Netherlands from harmful foreign influences. From Middle Dutch stories in general, Dutch literary educators believed that children would learn typical Dutch qualities like sobriety, profundity, realism and humour (Van Kalmthout 2002, p. 103). *Reynard the Fox* would teach them the typical Dutch democratic public-spirit (Leerssen 2006, p. 88). Thus, the reading of *Reynard* was in the service of nation building. That the main character of the story that was supposed to teach the children these qualities remained controversial, becomes clear from the preface of the school edition of Ligthart and Kaakebeen (1909):

(...) scholar and layman, old and young, in every civilized country, in their turn take what this sly, villainous character does to his fellow men to heart. This seems to speak seriously against us. Do we enjoy low pieces of roguery? We, who do not always act morally, while always wanting to do so. Could we perhaps be somewhat related to this

¹⁴ Although the story had found its literary expression in Flanders, it was used by this Dutch speaking part of Belgium in their battle against the French hegemony, claiming that it represented the Dutch cultural tradition (Leerssen 2006, p. 82).

rough, but at the same time elegant brute? Do we have something of a fox's nature in ourselves? (Ligthart and Kaakebeen 1909, p. 19, my translation)

Ligthart was one of the most well known reforming pedagogues of The Netherlands. He was both a teacher and an editor of schoolbooks, he developed a reading method used to this day, and he also wrote about education. In his preface, Ligthart searched for a justification to expose children to the story. 'Reynard, Reynard the Fox is simply a scoundrel,' he wrote, 'A thorough scoundrel. A low, cunning scoundrel. A mean, and moreover, a nasty scoundrel' (Ligthart and Kaakebeen 1909, p. 2, my translation). But then he started to defend the wretch, using the same arguments as Froude used half a century earlier. 'Reynard has courage,' Ligthart stated, otherwise he would not have dared to stand up against the whole world alone. 'And he has brains,' otherwise he would not have been able to fight and triumph over his physically and socially stronger adversaries. 'And above all, there is no better and cosier family man than him.' (Ligthart and Kaakebeen 1909, p. 20–28, my translations).

Thus, like Froude, Ligthart pleaded courage and intelligence in mitigation of Reynard's villainous behaviour. This can be explained by looking at the pedagogical and educational discourse at the beginning of the twentieth century in The Netherlands. Character building stood at the centre of interest. It was said that character building formed that part of education in which all threads came together. Up until the second half of the nineteenth century public education had been aimed at the consolidation of existing social relationships. At the end of the nineteenth century this changed in favour of educating the people for the benefit of a strong nation, not only from a perspective of providing them with a shared cultural knowledge, but mainly because of the developing meritocracy. The Industrial Revolution placed the social hierarchy in a different perspective. People were no longer destined to occupy the same social position as their parents, they could climb up the ladder by individual accomplishments. Industrialisation brought about many new jobs that demanded special qualities that could be obtained through education and experience. As people were no longer what they were born, but what they achieved, character building became the spearhead of education and the development of such qualities as courage and intellect, two of the most essential characteristics of a valuable person, replaced the raising of a moral conscience and the consolidation of the status quo.¹⁵

Furthermore, Ligthart added a quality that he apparently considered to be the most important of all: being a family man. Reynard the family man seems to be typically Dutch. None of the English adaptations mentioned it. According to Dutch pedagogy, the character of the child could best be bred in the safe surroundings of family life. Ligthart's defence of Reynard stood at the threshold of Reynard's rising star as the ideal family man, manifested in the expansion of family scenes in rewritings for children in the first half of the twentieth century in The Netherlands (Fig. 4).

Family life was indeed promoted as the cornerstone of Dutch society at that time. In fact, the prime minister of the first confessional government of The Netherlands, Abraham Kuyper, imposed a morality offensive on The Netherlands in which the ideal family consisted of a father (1), who provided enough family income for a mother (2) to be able to stay home and take care of the children (3). According to Kuyper the family constituted the foundation of religion, nation and society which, in his view, represented the Holy Trinity. He used the ideal composition of a family as a metaphor for society; not only was family life reflected in society, society was reflected in family life as well (Bakker 1995, p. 45–49). Thus, the story

¹⁵ In Britain, the Industrial Revolution occurred earlier. But none of the adaptations refer to it. This might be explained by the fact that Darwinist notions on determination by heredity were more influential in the Anglo-Saxon countries at that time (Bakker 2006, p. 218).

Fig. 4 Reynard the Family Man.
From *Reynaart de Vos* [Reynard the
Fox] by Kuhfus (1931)



of *Reynard the Fox* was manipulated; under the guise of making the literary heritage accessible to children, Dutch children were taught one of the most prevailing social values of the time.

Reynard the Vehicle: Conclusion

Reynard the Fox has left many descendants behind. Both English and Dutch literature are still haunted by his wit, his warped sense of humour and his wickedness. As Reynard the text crossed the Channel in the fifteenth century, Reynard the character managed to survive the moralising seventeenth, elitist eighteenth and critical nineteenth century by slipping into the realm of children's literature. There, however, he had to change fur. The realm of children's literature is constrained by society's perception of what is good and appropriate for children, and Reynard's tricks were obviously not always regarded as such. Nevertheless, both in animal stories and fairy tales, both in the choice to punish Reynard for his actions and to let him get away with them, *Reynard the Fox* served as a vehicle to transmit moral messages and cultural knowledge for many generations. The members of his family tree differed according to the time and the place they were born. They depended heavily on quickly changing ideas about the child and child education, so the different adaptations succeeded each other rapidly. While they enabled Reynard to live on and provided Reynard's readers with knowledge and entertainment, they also equip Reynard researchers with a spotlight that illuminates both the cultural construction of the child and the function and status of the medieval original within a particular culture. Moreover, now that horror books have become a popular genre for children, the recent emergence of rewritings, in which Reynard's earlier carefully erased wickedness looms up again, points to a new branch of Reynard descendants who seem likely to let the next generation of readers shiver with excitement. Biegel (1972) and Van Daele (1996) preserved every bad characteristic of Reynard in their Dutch adaptations. And in Hastings' rewriting (1990), the story ends with Reynard lying in wait for new, innocent victims. It seems to have not been difficult for Reynard the villain to slip back into his scarlet, wild coat. For although he may have lost some of his fur, he did not lose his fangs; Reynard the Fox will strike again.

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